Chapter 23

Stepping into the (Social Media) Game:
Building Athlete Identity via Twitter

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how rookie athletes in Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), and National Hockey League (NHL), used Twitter as an identity expression tool. A representative sample of tweets from athletes selected in the first round of the 2011 amateur draft of each sports league was selected for analysis. Results revealed that identity manifested in the following ways: (a) Athletes as dedicated workers; (b) Athletes as pop culture consumers; (c) Athletes as sports fans; (d) Athletes as motivators; (e) Athletes as information seekers; and (f) Athletes as everyday people. Through social media, athletes can more actively and diversely assert their identity. This action fosters identification, liking, and parasocial interaction with fans as athletes appear more approachable and similar. The ability to construct and disseminate a variety of identities holds important implications for athletes, which are discussed in the concluding section of the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter have rapidly permeated the sports world (Sanderson, 2011a). One of the more noteworthy trends emerging from this marriage is athletes using these communicative channels to become more active media producers (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). This includes athletes optimizing self-presentation and projecting preferred identities to the public, countering mass media framings and providing fans with opportunities to validate these identities (Sanderson, 2008). Through social media, athletes promote and emphasize aspects of their identity that would be difficult to transmit using traditional media channels. For example, Florida Marlins outfielder Logan Morrison uses Twitter to display advisor, sarcastic, and humorous identities to his followers as represented by this small sample. To one person who asked, "@

LoMoMarlins I just want to sext you all day," Morrison responded "It'll have 2 b after 9pm. Im out of daytime minutes this month"; "Fellas, if she doesn't kiss you by the 3rd date, she is in it for the free food…"; and "Just challenged the guy at the urinal next to me to a sword fight #Stranger-Danger" (http://www.twitter.com/LoMoMarlins).

Morrison's tweets have been well-received by his followers but also have created controversy with the Marlins organization. During the 2011 baseball season, Marlins president Larry Beinfest publicly requested that Morrison tone down the content of his tweets (Gardner, 2011). Later that season, the Marlins temporarily demoted Morrison to the minor leagues, a move that was heavily speculated to be influenced by his Twitter activity (Brown, 2011).

Social media offers a number of advantages to athletes (e.g., counter media framing, connect with teammates and fans) (Kassing and Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson, 2011a; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011) and it is not surprising that they have adopted social media at rapid rates. Although social media is extensively used by well-known athletes, rookie athletes are using social media to build personas and cultivate fan followings. How incoming professional athletes use Twitter to express identity is the focus of this research. Athletes use a variety of social media tools, but at the present time, Twitter is the social media tool "of choice" amongst athletes (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011) and serves as the data source for this chapter. The chapter examines tweets from a convenience sample of athletes selected in the first round of the 2011 Major League Baseball (MLB), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL) and National Hockey League (NHL) player drafts for a two month period.

To start, I review relevant literature on social media and identity, and the influence of social media on athlete identity and discuss the dialogical self theory (Hermans, Kempen, and Van Loon, 1992). This theory provides a useful framework to interpret athlete identity expressed via social media. Subsequently, I present themes emerging from the sample of athlete tweets while discussing implications arising from the data. I conclude by offering directions for future research and additional readings on this subject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Identity

Social media, designed to facilitate connections, "is architected by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration and community (Meraz, 2009, p. 682). Social media also:

…refers to activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media…Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios (Safko & Brake, 2009, p. 6).

Twitter is one of the most popular social media platforms at the present time. Twitter allows individuals to create microblogs wherein they construct and distribute messages (termed tweets) of up to 140 characters to other Twitter users who are "following" them. One's Twitter account is linked to a username preceded by the @ symbol and each tweet appears on the profile of each person's Twitter followers. Twitter users can reply to tweets from other Twitter users or simply re-tweet a Twitter user's message, which re-transmits that particular message to all of one's Twitter followers. Twitter has experienced immense growth and is seen as an important resource for breaking immediate news and assessing public opinion (Gilbertson, 2009; O'Connor, Balasubramanyan, Routledge, & Smith, 2010) and this has certainly occurred with athletes (Sanderson,

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